

Environmental Security: Achieving Durable Outcomes in Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations

A STAP brief

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STAP SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL
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1. Introduction

Many of the places facing the greatest environmental problems also confront challenges related to conflict and/or state fragility, so-called fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS).¹ Indeed, according to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Independent Evaluation Office (IEO), the vast majority of GEF projects are in FCS: in the period 2006–2020, “GEF has invested over \$4.0 billion in countries/economies affected by major armed conflict (i.e., conflicts with more than 1,000 battle deaths), accounting for 29 percent of its global portfolio. In total, 45 percent of GEF investments have been in projects implemented in at least one conflict-affected country/economy... Fragility is even more widespread: 88.3 percent of the GEF’s country/economy-level projects were in fragile situations, categorized as either alert (very fragile) or warning (of concern).”²

Conflict and fragility, moreover, impact investment outcomes. For example, the IEO found impacts on effectiveness and efficiency, and noted that the presence of major armed conflict in a project country correlated with a lower score for sustainability in terminal evaluations.³ The GEF Partnership has increased its attention to FCS over the past decade, and the GEF Secretariat has committed to developing more tailored guidance for conflict-sensitive programming (see Box 1). Meanwhile, GEF agencies are keenly aware of these challenges, and many have developed their own policies, strategies, guidance, and tools to support FCS-specific project and program planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.⁴

This brief summarizes and builds upon insights from a workshop convened by the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) and GEF Secretariat in November 2023.ⁱ The workshop considered how

ⁱ STAP and the GEF Secretariat organized a virtual workshop in November 2023 that brought together representatives from the GEF Partnership and several external practitioners to share best practices and lessons learned from designing and implementing projects in FCS. Panellists included André Wehrli (Swiss Development Corporation), Phemo Kgomotso (United Nations Development Programme), Tracy Hart (World Bank), Markus Mayer (German Agency for International Cooperation – GIZ), Phil Priestley (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), and Nora Moraga-Lewy (Conservation International). Representatives from the GEF Secretariat (Claude Gascon and Jonathan Caldicott), the GEF IEO (Geeta Battrra) and STAP (Rosina Bierbaum) offered opening and closing remarks. Susanne Schmeier (STAP Panel Member for International Waters) facilitated the workshop and moderated discussion among participants.

best to incorporate available guidance into GEF practice to increase the likelihood of enduring environmental outcomes in FCS.

Box 1. Evolution of FCS analysis at the GEF

STAP's early analysis noting the overlap between GEF-funded projects and conflict laid the groundwork for a 2018 paper on [Environmental Security: dimensions and priorities](#).⁵ This paper introduced a framework distinguishing four dimensions of environmental security relevant to GEF programming. Based on its findings, STAP recommended that the GEF should: (1) explicitly address environmental security in project and program design; (2) assess conflict risk routinely among investment risks beyond the scope of GEF intervention; (3) evaluate the relationships between environmental change and vulnerability within GEF interventions using tools such as the [Resilience, Adaptation Pathways and Transformation Assessment \(RAPTA\) guidelines](#); and (4) contribute to conflict prevention through environmental cooperation.

Subsequently, the GEF IEO in 2020 concluded its in-depth evaluation report on [GEF Support in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations](#).⁶ The IEO recommended that the GEF project review process be used to identify conflict- and fragility-related risks to project outcomes and to develop mitigation measures. It also recommended that existing learning, exchange, and technical assistance platforms be leveraged to improve conflict-sensitive design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of GEF projects. The IEO evaluation noted that at least 11 implementing agencies had incorporated considerations about conflict and fragility into their safeguards and associated procedures, and recommended that the GEF Environmental and Social Safeguards be expanded to address key conflict-sensitive considerations. Finally, the IEO recommended that the GEF Secretariat "develop guidance for conflict-sensitive programming" to "address measures across the programming life cycle, from design to implementation and closure", drawing upon agency practices.

Most recently, the GEF Secretariat's [GAP Analysis of GEF-Funded Activity and Engagement in Fragility, Conflict, and Violence-Affected States](#) reiterated the GEF Secretariat's intention to "...develop guidance for GEF projects in FCS countries – particularly for use by the GEF Agencies that have not developed FCS-related policies and operational guidance."⁷ The analysis concluded that "GEF Agencies have varying policies, strategies, approaches, frameworks, and guidelines for FCS" or "are in the process of establishing appropriate approaches to operations in FCS countries, with GEF financing" and that future GEF guidance "would be based on good practices inside and outside the GEF partnership and existing guidance materials of GEF Agencies that have experience in FCS countries."

2. Agency practices addressing fragility, conflict, and environmental security

GEF agencies employ different approaches when working in FCS, many of which are detailed in strategy and policy documents such as the [Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations and Small Island Developing States Approach](#) from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the [Strategy for Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience in Africa \(2022-2026\)](#) from the African Development Bank Group (AfDB), and the World Bank Group (WBG)'s [Policy on Development Cooperation and Fragility, Conflict, and Violence](#). Other bilateral agencies such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) are sources of relevant good practice as well.

In sum, this guidance illustrates how each of the four dimensions that STAP earlier identified, in its framework on [Environmental Security: dimensions and priorities](#) and corresponding recommendations, can be put into practice, as outlined below.

1. Explicitly address environmental security in project and program design

As SDC guidance illustrates, there is a spectrum of options that project designers may adopt regarding the objectives of an intervention – from “do no harm”, by proactively mitigating proximate risks to project participants and affected communities, to contributing to peace and stability within existing commitments without altering the primary objectives, to “directly and deliberately addressing the root causes and drivers of conflict.”⁸

At the program level there are also opportunities to ensure that interventions align in a coherent approach to supporting environmental goals within the context of overall peace and security. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) guidance, for example, aims to ensure that projects (i) align with their country-level strategic and programmatic approaches; (ii) strengthen, build, replicate, or scale up what’s already proven and working; and (iii) prioritize income generation to contribute to a “regenerative economy.”⁹

2. Assess conflict risk routinely among investment risks beyond the scope of GEF intervention

Many GEF agencies – including the ADB, AfDB, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNDP, and the World Bank – systematically conduct fragility, conflict, and resilience assessments in FCS.¹⁰ SDC’s conflict sensitivity approaches are intended to ensure engagement is not undermined by conflict risk or fragility, while also reducing risks or preventing the escalation of conflict.¹¹

Navigating stakeholder dynamics in FCS may also require specialized expertise. Some agencies, such as the World Bank and UNDP, incorporate conflict mediation mechanisms in certain cases and/or work with advisers trained to address conflict issues on the ground. For example, UNDP, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs have funded advisers as part of the Climate Security Mechanism. These advisers work in specific conflict-affected or fragile regions and advise United Nations agencies and other partners on climate-related conflict risks and their prevention or mitigation.

3. Evaluate the relationships between environmental change and vulnerability within GEF interventions

UNEP has developed principles for climate change adaptation and mitigation programming in FCS, which apply as well to broader environmental programming. The starting point is context analysis, which “must take account the current situation, vulnerabilities (e.g., political, social, and climate-related), and social and institutional capacity” and assess how “contextual changes could exacerbate existing tensions or create new tensions related to the environment and natural resources.”¹²

FAO similarly stresses the need to integrate a comprehensive understanding of context and identify programming entry points to address contextual drivers of vulnerability; improve horizontal and vertical collaboration; support inclusive participation and decision-making; and establish a sustainability strategy suited to a rapidly changing context.¹³

4. Contribute to conflict prevention through environmental cooperation

Environmental peacebuilding approaches aim to enhance cooperation among different actors or groups to achieve environmental benefits while directly addressing fragility and conflict drivers. For example, UNEP has compiled lessons from investments in Nepal and the Sudan that demonstrated increases in social trust and inter-community relations, improved capacity to mediate natural resource conflicts, and improved economic prospects for vulnerable communities; these investments also strengthened national-level preparedness to identify and respond to climate-related security risks.¹⁴

Conservation International (CI) has been supporting the integration of conservation and peacebuilding for over a decade through its Policy Center for Environment and Peace, since renamed the [Center for Communities and Conservation \(CCC\)](#). The CCC works to build awareness and capacities among leadership, staff, and partners; integrate conflict and peace considerations in organizational processes and project design; and support research and advocacy efforts to build evidence and promote broader uptake of these priorities.¹⁵

3. Integrating FCS considerations into GEF program and project design

How can GEF agencies increase the likelihood of achieving durable global environmental benefits (GEBs) when operating in FCS? The starting point is effective program and project design. GEF project and program design templates (Project Identification Form [PIF] and Program Framework Document [PFD] respectively) offer six entry points for effectively integrating FCS guidance.

1. Context analysis

In presenting the rationale for a project or program, proponents are asked to describe the environmental challenge to be addressed, the key elements of the system, and the underlying drivers of environmental change affecting the intervention.

Projects taking place in FCS highlight the need for systems-thinking in project design and implementation. Many organizations divide expertise related to conflict risk assessment, institutional analysis, and environmental programming. Yet these perspectives need to be brought together to untangle complexity so that root causes can be identified and managed through focused interventions while also anticipating feedbacks, enhancing synergies, managing trade-offs, and building resilience.¹⁶

STAP's environmental security framework – which outlines four dimensions relevant to the GEF – can be used to unpack the complexity of FCS by considering four inter-connected questions:¹⁷ (a) How do ecosystem goods and services in the intervention area underpin human well-being and security? (b) How might conflict and fragility affect the viability or sustainability of investments in environmental protection? (c) How might ecosystem degradation, resource competition, or inequitable resource distribution increase vulnerability and conflict risk? And, lastly, (d) How can environmental cooperation increase capacity for conflict management, prevention, and recovery?

The World Bank's [Defueling Conflict](#) report provides more detailed tools and typologies of risks and drivers that can be used to articulate the environment–conflict nexus.¹⁸ The report illustrates these in the context of key environmental programming areas (e.g. blue or coastal marine green projects,

sustainable land management, pollution management, chemical management, etc.), and subsequent work is under way to tailor this guidance to different regions and resource systems.

2. Future narratives

Developing several short narratives of possible futures, including associated opportunities and challenges, can help to better understand how different future scenarios could affect desired outcomes, including achievement of durable GEBs. When designing an intervention aiming to be robust amidst multiple future scenarios, it can help to incorporate an explicit account of the baseline scenario and possible future trends related to fragility and conflict, among other things (e.g. economic and demographic trends, climate change, etc.). Working with future narratives in this way can assist project developers and stakeholders to more fully consider the interaction between potential scenarios and proposed interventions. For example, are conflict dynamics a driver of environmental degradation or a limiting factor for the achievement of GEBs?

Descriptions of how an uncertain future could unfold can be developed based on an understanding of trends and interactions between the key elements of the system and its drivers.¹⁹ Tools such as GIZ's integrated peace and conflict assessment are designed for undertaking a situation analysis, but they can also provide a foundation for developing future narratives. The World Bank's [Defueling Conflict](#) report illustrates how pathway modelling can be used to show the relationship in different contexts between environmental issues, such as climate change, and conflict.²⁰

3. Outcome targets

STAP's paper on "enabling elements of good project design"²¹ notes the importance of co-benefits for local stakeholders to increase the effectiveness of GEF investment and the durability of GEBs. Enhancing resilience and food/energy security, and promoting peace and stability, are potential social co-benefits identified by STAP based on the GEF-8 results measurement framework.²²

Because of the heightened risks in FCS, achieving GEBs in these contexts requires paying even greater attention to the co-benefits of project interventions. Local environmental and socioeconomic co-benefits – such as improved food security and better livelihoods – may be essential to securing the environmental outcomes targeted in the first place. Such co-benefits can also contribute to reducing conflict and promoting cooperation, thus making it more likely that GEBs will endure.

A good project or program design will distinguish co-benefits that are pre-conditions for success from those that are incidental positive benefits beyond the primary outcomes, and will then reflect this analysis in the setting of outcome targets.

4. Theory of change

A theory of change (ToC) identifies the specific causal links among outputs and outcomes, with evidence, and describes the causal pathways by which interventions are expected to have effect.²³ In the FCS context, a ToC can identify linkages between conflict risk and environmental outcomes. It may also articulate how related issues such as human rights, tenure security, gender equality, and social inclusion interact with conflict risk and may be barriers to, or enablers of, the stated outcomes.

Embedding indicators that specifically address the links between FCS and the environment in the ToC can help project implementers assess the strength of these connections over time.²⁴ The ToC provides

the “bridge” between analysis and programming, creating an opportunity for project developers to ensure that proposed interventions are relevant and appropriate to the FCS and increase the likelihood of achieving targeted GEBs.

5. Risk assessment

Every GEF project must report on the residual risks to project implementation. GEF-8 design templates introduced standardized categories to allow more direct comparisons in risk identification and assessment among projects.

IEO analysis noted, however, that risk assessment and design of mitigation strategies for FCS remain priorities for improvement.²⁵ Importantly, because risks tend to be very dynamic in FCS, the actual risk profile may change significantly between the time of initial project identification and eventual implementation. This underscores the importance of making explicit the assumptions that go into risk ratings at each stage of the project cycle, so they can be readily confirmed or revised as the context evolves. Likewise, mitigation strategies may include periodic review mechanisms and contingency plans that can be readily invoked if needed.

6. Stakeholder engagement

Although described near the end of the PIF and PFD, effective stakeholder engagement is essential from the start to address each of the preceding points – from context analysis to development of future narratives, identification of outcome targets and change pathways reflected in the ToC, as well as assessment of risks and mitigation strategies.²⁶

This is especially critical in FCS, where the risk of disrupting sensitive stakeholder relationships is often higher, and where changing circumstances may require more frequent review and validation of the ToC. Meaningfully engaging local stakeholders may influence the scope of the intervention and the outcomes targeted, as in the case of an FAO-supported project in Afghanistan – here, a community-based disaster risk reduction mechanism expanded beyond identifying natural hazards to also designing interventions aimed at addressing some of the causes and drivers behind localized conflict.²⁷ Similarly, in Burkina Faso UNDP engaged marginalized resource users in the design of a [Land Degradation Neutrality](#) project, resulting in a focus on barriers to sustainable land management to build both ecological and community resilience, promoting social cohesion to ensure sustained environmental benefits.²⁸

4. Systemic enhancements to improve GEF engagement in FCS

The preceding sections highlight the breadth of relevant guidance from agencies and of entry points for its application in project and program design. Additionally, there are important opportunities at a systemic level to strengthen GEF engagement in FCS and increase the likelihood that its investments achieve enduring GEBs.

1. Communicating risk appetite and its implications for FCS

The newly proposed GEF Risk Appetite²⁹ affirms GEF’s commitment to working in challenging country contexts and explicitly acknowledges the heightened Context and Execution risks associated with FCS. An important follow-up priority is to build out the Risk Appetite Framework, including assessing where policies, procedures, and practices need adjustment.³⁰

Such follow-up may include special consideration of FCS requirements as part of the effort to streamline project preparation and approval processes, to ensure that there is room for appropriate stakeholder engagement and risk assessment.

Adjustments to the Environmental and Social Safeguards may also be needed, or guidance on how these should be applied differentially in FCS. The IEO found that current GEF minimum safeguards “lack a holistic recognition of the way that conflicts might be linked to the environment and natural resources.”³¹ Addressing this gap can help manage the risk that an intervention undermines or replaces existing governance mechanisms, leading to maladaptation, social conflict, or negative environmental outcomes.

Finally, there is a need for additional communications regarding operational mechanisms to achieve flexibility and adaptive management during project and program implementation, as elaborated next.

2. Supporting flexible and adaptive management in implementation

Adaptive management is defined as an “intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context.”³² Adaptive management is particularly important when working in environments that are unstable, fragile, and/or in transition, where the context, methods, or opportunities for influence can change significantly. It is critical that operational procedures enable this flexibility to ensure that project or program objectives are met. To do this effectively requires consistent monitoring and inclusion of a real-time learning element in program management to ensure that the intervention remains fit for purpose.³³

Multiple GEF agencies have noted that operational flexibility is critical to prepare, implement, monitor, and evaluate projects and programs in fragile and conflict-affected countries and regions, and many already have specific measures in place to support this.³⁴ Yet project teams are sometimes unaware of the opportunities to adjust implementation plans under current GEF procedures. Divergent views also remain about the degree to which GEF policies and procedures support the necessary flexibility in practice. Clear communication is needed on the scope for adaptation and the steps to access this flexibility in FCS. This may include, for example, changes to outcome indicators and targets, activity plans, implementation sites, timelines, budgets, and co-financing arrangements.

3. Enabling learning and exchange

The GEF Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning aims to “improve and enhance knowledge capture, sharing and learning processes” to enable capacity-building and “greater exchange of knowledge and collaboration” across the GEF Partnership.³⁵ The IEO recommended that “the GEF Secretariat together with the Agencies should leverage existing platforms for learning, exchange, and technical assistance” to improve conflict-sensitive design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of GEF projects.³⁶

Many GEF agencies have experience in FCS-specific training, and several communities of practice already exist among GEF agencies, which could aid in streamlining best practices. For example, ADB, AfDB, CI, FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) have developed internal modules and online resources for their staff, with most training, guidance, and tools also open to the public.³⁷ The World Bank runs online courses on specialized topics such as [Geospatial Information Technology in](#)

[Fragile Contexts](#), and has published analysis and lessons learned as well as resource-specific tools, policy briefs, and checklists. External communities of practice such as the [Environmental Peacebuilding Association](#) similarly offer trainings and other learning opportunities, including a [massive open online course](#) (MOOC) on environmental security which has engaged over 20,000 participants from more than 175 countries. UNEP and UNDP were contributing partners and have co-developed more recent courses on climate change, peace, and security.³⁸

If tailored metrics are adopted to track GEF investments in FCS, moreover, these could be an important source of cross-country learning. Analysis of such indicators can, over time, contribute to knowledge and learning about the relationship between interventions in FCS and outcomes for people and the environment. This includes deepening the evidence on environmental peacebuilding outcomes, which is complicated because of long time horizons, engagement of multiple actors and systems, multi-layered causal chains, and dynamic and insecure operational contexts.³⁹ If agencies were able to co-develop indicators or indices of social-ecological resilience that helped relate goals of environmental conservation, climate adaptation, livelihoods, and social cohesion, this could help align efforts within particular geographies. It could also enable cross-country comparisons to identify strategic success factors in different contexts.

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